

Understanding Postmodernism

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“...the men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do—two hundred chiefs, with all their relatives under their command.” ~ 1 Chronicles 12

- I. Understanding Postmodernism
 - A. Both a **philosophy** and a **cultural mood** that describes “our times”
 - B. We are all, in a sense, postmodern
- II. Historical perspective
 - A. Pre-modern Period: < up to 1600
 1. Strong belief in the **supernatural**
 2. Authority of oral and written traditions to give the “Big Story”
 3. Truth is objective, corresponds to reality, and may be known via:
 - i. Revelation
 - ii. Faculties (reason and senses)
 - iii. Experience
 - B. Modern Period: 1600 to 1960
 1. **Skepticism** of the supernatural
 2. Authority of observation, human reason, and science to give the “Big Story”
 - i. Belief in progress
 3. Truth is objective, corresponds to reality, and may be known via:
 - i. Revelation
 - ii. Faculties
 - iii. Experience
 - C. Postmodern Period: 1960 to ?
 1. Skeptical of all claims to knowledge
 2. Rejects all authorities claiming to give a “Big Story”
 - i. Disbelief in progress
 3. Truth and reality are only **subjective** constructs attained via:
 - i. Revelation
 - ii. Faculties
 - iii. Experience

III. Key Thinkers

A. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

1. *Beyond Good and Evil* (1891)
2. "God is Dead"
3. "Truth is an illusion"

B. Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)

1. *Of Grammatology*
2. Deconstruction: no real meaning to any text

C. Michael Foucault (1926-1984)

1. *Madness and Civilization* (1960)
2. Critique of the discourses of power (language is used to oppress others)

D. Richard Rorty (1931-?)

1. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979)
2. Anti-foundationalism
3. Anti-essentialism
4. Truth is a social construct

IV. Postmodernism: The Philosophy

A. Rejection of "essentialism"

1. Things do not have real qualities independent of our knowing them
"In the naming, the things named are called into their thinging; thinging they unfold world, and thus are abiding ones." ~ Martin Heidegger
2. There are only interpretations in different ways by different people
3. What is "normal" (i.e. knowledge) is really determined by power.
4. What one believes to be true is only the product of his/her cultural situation.
5. Truth is nothing more than interpretation
"Truth is...a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, a sum, in short, of human relationships which, rhetorically and poetically intensified, ornamented and transformed, come to be thought of, after long usage by a people, as fixed, binding, and canonical. Truths are illusions, worn-out metaphors now impotent to stir the senses, coins which have lost their faces and are considered metal rather than currency." ~ Friedrich Nietzsche

- B. Rejection of universal explanations
 - 1. There are no legitimate metanarratives
 - 2. Any universal theory rejects and suppresses something or someone
 - 3. All metanarratives are tools of oppression
- C. Role of the “interpretive” community
 - 1. Meaning can only be derived from one’s cultural context (“history is bunk”)
 - 2. Words create (not reflect) reality and have no normative meanings
 - 3. Meaning is created by one’s interpretive community
- D. Rejection of traditional logic
 - 1. Everything is interpretation
 - 2. All interpretations are valid
 - 3. Coherence and consistency are illusions
- V. Where you find it
 - A. Literature: Deconstructionism
 - B. Philosophy: Relativism, pragmatism
 - C. Art: Dada, surrealism, pop-nihilism
 - D. History: Revisionist (anti-metanarrative)
 - E. Sociology: Multiculturalism
- VI. The Contradictions
 - A. Proposing that “there is no truth,” which is a truth statement
 - B. Asking that we agree with the postmodern interpretation that there is nothing but interpretation
 - C. Announcing authoritatively that authoritative announcements are invalid
 - D. Offering the metanarrative that there are no metanarratives
 - E. Claiming it is immoral to oppress people with morality
- VII. The Culture
 - A. Truth is not objective, but based on personal feelings
 - B. There are no universal values that apply everywhere to everyone
 - C. Basis for moral action is not universal rights and morals, but relationship with the other person
 - D. We are the product of our culture; nothing more
 - E. No one has the right to tell others that they are wrong in their interpretation

VIII. Postmodernism and Christianity

- A. Christianity IS a **metanarrative**
- B. Christianity IS **historical**
- C. Christianity DOES propose moral norms, authority, and objective truth
- D. What becomes of Scripture and interpretation of Scripture?
- E. There are points of agreement
 - 1. **Modernism** is flawed
 - 2. **Community** is vitally important
 - 3. Without God, knowledge is impossible

*"I came to realize that the search of the philosophers for a grand scheme that would encompass everything was illusory. Only a theism that combined a God with equal measures of truth, love, and justice could do the trick. But since I could not imagine myself being religious, and had indeed become more raucously secular, I did not consider that an option for me." ~ Richard Rorty, *Trotsky and the Wild Orchids**